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ABSTRACT

Statewide competency testing as a high school graduation requirement represents a threat to those who encourage broad notions of reading and writing, even when a number of testing innovations in reading and writing mean a step forward in education. In Alberta, Canada, the English exam comes in a non-academic and an academic version, and contributes 50% of the student's final grade. The writing component of the test requires an expository essay from the academic students and a piece of "functional" writing from the non-academic students. While the selections for the reading component can be considered progressive (e.g., works by Joan Didion, Margaret Atwood), the format is multiple choice, which eliminates the multiple meanings encouraged in reading works of any subtlety. English teachers surveyed indicated that their classroom programs had been affected in ways that contravene the intentions and spirit of the examinations, including: (1) changes in regular tests to correspond more closely to the comprehensive exam format; (2) increased use of multiple-choice testing in the literature program; and (3) new importance among administrators as tests became contests among schools. Such curricular compulsion of exam preparation remains a major source of distortion that can render even the most promising approach a rote and remote exercise. (Examples of writing assignments are included. (NKA)

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WHEN TESTS DARE TO BE PROGRESSIVE:

CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

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WHEN TESTS DARE TO BE PROGRESSIVE: CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

The Context: Political Demand and Pedagogical Promise

State wide-testing, whether as a competency measure or a criterion-referenced standard, has swept the continent taking hold in 36 states and six provinces (Blair, 1985, p. 18). The threat of the tests to those who would encourage broad notions of reading and writing has been represented as reducing classroom work to irrelevance (Cooper, 1981, p. 5), displacing the central place of literature (Myers, 1981, p. 166) and promoting a "lesser definition of literacy" (Probst, 1982, p. 22). This paper explores that threat in a promising guise; it presents a progressive instance of the tests examining both the nature of their construction and their impact on the English classroom. The province of Alberta, in reinstituting diploma examinations for high school graduation after an absence of a dozen years, has brought to its testing program a number of innovations in reading and writing which have meant a step forward in education, but a step that still tends to falter in the examination format.

To portray this dilemma, the paper is divided into two parts, into a close reading of the examinations and a report on the perceptions of grade twelve English teachers on the effect which the examination had have in the two years of their implementation. With the Alberta Diploma Examinations, we have a most interesting experiment, a strong deliberate effort not to go back to the basics, but to marry political necessity for greater accountability to the progressive gains in English education over the last two decades, as politician might seem to embrace teacher in some sort of ideal state north of the Montana border. The Alberta exams can best be described as an instance of precious new wine in rather old bottles. The question we would pose is

whether the final kick comes from the wine or its bottling, or to reverse the formulation by drawing on Marshall McLuhan, whether the medium is not inevitably the message. It should be noted that one of the authors, Allen Bobie, has been a participant-observer in this study, that is, he has prepared grade twelve students for the exams since their re-introduction and participated in the marking of the diploma examinations. As will be seen, his experiences serve as a touchstone in this analysis.

The Tests: Fresh Wines in Dusty Bottles

The Alberta Diploma Examinations can be written in six subjects at the end of grade twelve. The exam in English comes in an academic and non-academic version of the English exam, the only subject which must be written for graduation. The examination contributes fifty percent of the students' final grade, with course work counting for the other fifty. In describing the rationale for the examinations, the provincial department of education openly acknowledges the limitations of paper and pencil testing. The exams are only meant to "complement" the curriculum and the teacher's program; they are closely based on the curriculum specifications already in place in the province. Ultimately, the exams are meant to "reflect the wholeness of the Language Arts program," as one provincial document puts it (Alberta Education, 1983, p. 1). So far, we might conclude, so progressive, and yet there is more to this promising new vintage.

The exams are divided into two sittings. Part A: Written Response, as the first part is termed, reflects the influence of both the writing process and James Britton's (1972) construct which moves from the expressive to the transactional. However, this progressivism is sustained only on the academic

version of the examination. At the academic level, in response to two brief pieces of literature the student first write in a personal vein, then do a brief critical piece, finally arriving at what could be termed a transactional piece of expository prose on a literary theme (see Figure 1). In each case, outlining and rough work are encouraged and provided for. Throughout the Written Response, the student continues to develop a common theme in response to the two works.

Place Figure 1 here

The possibility of a worm in this apple of an examination becomes apparent in the preparation which teachers have begun to provide their students for this response. Based on his experience as a marker of the exams, Allen Bobie coaches his grade twelve students for the personal response on the exam by suggesting that they would do well to keep their own first responses in check, in favor of what they would project an adult/teacher might welcome as a personal response from a responsible student. This sort of coaching to second-guess adult expectations has begun to dominate the college admissions essay (Winerip, 1987). Recognizing that this sort of bottling taints the new wine, Bobie points out that this form of "personal response" is still that much more sophisticated, for all of its projection and contortion.

The examination for the non-academic students lacks the Brittonesque developmental structure; it begins with a personal response to a reading, but then moves to "functional" writing, and, in what might be taken as a progressive gesture, the final question is on visual literacy. It asks the

students to interpret a cartoon, often enough from The New Yorker and once from Jules Feiffer's work from the Village Voice. This represents more than a failure to share the benefits of Britton's boon to writing with all students. It implies a future in the language of looking for work and mis-reading sophisticated funnies--and once work has been found? While for the academic students, the exams seem to foresee the nurturance of extended responses, personal and public, to the themes of responsibility, triumph and self-awareness, to draw on themes from three sets of exams. As Judith Chinn points out in her examination of testing in California, "Even students who go to Harvard need to apply for jobs" (1983, p. 15). And the reciprocal point, that non-academic students may need to argue a critical response to a situation, might also be thought to hold.

The second sitting for the students is entitled Part B: Reading (Multiple Choice). Though on first glance it may not seem so, the progressive element is once again present if not triumphing. Here it emerges in the reading selections, in the excerpting of Joan Didion, Margaret Atwood, Lillian Hellman and Ellen Gilchrist. By the second year of the exams the selection was more progressive in literary style and gender balance than anything else the students were likely to receive in their dated school anthologies. Shakespeare was present at the academic level exams without fail, and yet that was essentially it for pre-twentieth century literature in the certification of reading at the advanced high school level. It may be no way to introduce students to what is exciting and new in literature, and it may be no way to treat the history of literature, but it does reflect a progressive urge, and teachers, if no one else, might be moved by it to consider fresh voices for the classroom.

That much said, the regressive faults of the multiple choice test for literature need little elaboration: the multiple choice question demands the rapid elimination of the multiple meanings which we would often encourage in reading work of any subtlety. It runs contrary to much that the recent report Becoming a Nation of Readers holds to define the constructive, self-directed, motivated nature of reading (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, Wilkinson, 1985). In fact, "multiple choice test" would seem a misnomer--the choice is far too singular. With Shakespeare, we found that the format favors decoding, on getting at what the playwright really meant by this word or that phrase, if only he had had it in him to tell us as much. This, then, is the students final lesson on the nature of literature.

While the marking of the misnamed multiple choice examinations is a matter of machines, the assessment of the students' written response constitutes what might be construed as an expensive state-wide experiment in program implementation. Teachers from across the province are invited to a week-long junket in the capital city to team-mark the written responses at an hourly rate. Each paper is marked by three teachers on a number of five-point scales including thought, organization, choice, and convention with the major assignment. The efforts at quality control through training sessions and daily marking statistics show a progressive tendency reflecting what we know, for example, about holistic marking. It also created for the markers an interse immersion course in the nature of mass evaluation, as the curriculum initiative in the province moves from the Curriculum Development office to the Evaluation branch. The diploma exams in English represent a mix of progressive and regressive aspects. The final test in assessing their impact

and the balancing of this mixture lies in their impact on the English program, on which aspects have been felt in the classroom.

The Contest: Tuning the Curriculum To the Tests

In seeking the effect of the examinations on the teaching of English, we decided to work with a sample of those teachers who had marked in Edmonton. The province's plan to rotate the marking among teachers means that eventually the most of the high school English teachers will pass through this process; we also knew that in judging the impact of the examinations, then only two years in place, these markers would be the first to show signs of its influence in their curricular thinking. A brief survey was designed to tap these teachers perceptions of the examination's impact on their program and was sent to seventy-five teachers with recent experience marking; we had a return rate of forty-five or sixty percent. As a result, we found a number of areas in which the teachers felt their program had been affected, affected in ways that, unfortunately, contravene the intentions and spirit of the examinations.

The first aspect of influence is in the teachers design of writing tasks in the classroom. The question put was "How often do you create essay topics for students using the diploma exam format?" (see Table 1). Though the responses to the survey lack a fixed numerical value, it was designed to capture the teachers' sense of how "seldom," "occasional" or "frequent" the exams encroach on the program. In this case, close to half of the respondents find that with some frequency the exam shapes the topic of their classroom essay. This has the somewhat ironic effect of introducing the promising aspects of the exam into the classroom, but in the form of exam preparation

rather than as part of a more widely applicable writing process. While the recent national reports, such as The Writing Report Card (NAEP, 1986), call for for this extended, critical writing, finding all too little of it currently in the schools, it seems clear that if it becomes training in a single form, the transfer value of the exercise will be considerably hampered. It risks becoming a dead-end skill. The other indication of a distortion through exam preparation was the frequency of timed responses (20-25 minutes) in such areas as personal response and literary analysis, with a few teachers reporting that old examinations are used to set the direction of expository writing in the class.

Place Table 1 here

The other side of this writing after the examinations is in the teachers' evaluation of the students' work during the term. The exam format of categorical assessment on one-to-five scales has achieved degree of frequency among half the teachers (Table 1). Again tc be noted that while the four divisions (total impression, thought and detail; organization, matters of choice, matters of conventions) in the scoring are the same--some schools had rubber stamps made with the four categories--a good deal of the holistic advantage has been lost.

The format of the diploma examination, with both written response and multiple choice sections, had also begun to pervade evaluation procedures across the senior high grades of grades ten to twelve; sixty-seven percent of the respondents responded yes to the query "has your school changed the format

of grade ten and eleven exams to correspond more closely to the diploma exams?" Allen Bobie, in whose school this practice has been pursued over the past two years, has found that the element of preparation for the diploma examinations is the understood reason for following this format in the other grades, rather than any sense of its improved pedagogical status as an assessment instrument.

In the area of reading, the greatest sense of influence emerged in the increased use of multiple-choice testing as part of the literature program. The survey put the question to the teachers in terms of the amount of use prior to the implementation of the examinations in 1984 and the amount of use currently, in 1986 (Table 1). Not surprisingly, the rise is dramatic. To give an instance of the impact of this on the program in terms of classroom time, Allen Bobie spends at least six periods or close to five percent of his term in preparing students with multiple-choice testing; it is for him the clearest case of pursuing a questionable technique in the teaching of literature in order to prepare his anxious students for the diploma examinations. At such a point, the notion of the exams complementing the current curriculum begins to crumble.

Other instances of this movement from complement to dominance emerged in terms of the teachers' curriculum priorities. Through the use of a checklist, teachers assessed changes in the emphasis they gave to twelve particular language skills. A greater emphasis was noted by the teachers in the importance of reading and writing skills, along with vocabulary development, which is certainly to the exams' credit, while those suffering in this shift were creative writing, speaking and listening skills, and viewing skills. In particular, the library research essay was singled out as something that

losing its place in the grade twelve curriculum; the teachers whom we spoke to felt that it did not does not adequately address the focused type of response which the diploma exam demanded. Yet, of all the work done in that final year of high school among academic students, the library research paper comes closest to an experience in university-prep, in taking a try at the dominant university genre.

As a final measure of the examination's influence on the classroom, the survey explored perceptions of the administrator's concern with performance on the examinations. In response to the query "What importance is placed by superiors on your students' exam performance in relation to the provincial average?" we found the majority felt that this meeting the average had taken on at least some importance among administrators as tests become contests among schools and boards (Table 1). It has become the one easy measure of a certain kind of productivity, and toward this end of teacher evaluation, Allen Bobie has been asked by his principal to complete a class summary of student results for each of his classes, though the province issues only school-wide results.

Conclusion

The Diploma Examinations of Alberta represent a marriage of political accountability and pedagogical advancement. They serve to notify the teachers of the reality of the times, as well as introduce them to such advancements as writing from process and to recent openings in the canon of readings. The urgent question is whether the examinations can serve both ends. Progressive practices do not lend themselves easily to province-wide examinations. Clearly, some of this resulting distortion can be remedied through an ongoing

and sensitive revision of the exams. Yet it also seems apparent from our modest survey that the major source of distortion remains the curricular compulsion of exam preparation, an urge which can render even the most promising approach into a rote and remote exercise.

This damaging urge is a function of accountability; it results naturally enough from a high profile, province-wide testing program. The pressure to prepare is felt by everyone in the system from superintendent to student. Certainly, it is no less visible in the anxious students whom the grade twelve English teacher now faces; the students know better than anyone how the tests count. And this becomes the curricular imperative above all other concerns in the students' final year of high school language and literature. The immediate challenge to this province and to other jurisdictions struggling with this political pressure to test on a massive scale is to stand aware of the imminent dangers of such a program for even the best intentioned plans. The tendency is for the examinations to simply overwhelm the curriculum, rather than serve to guide and instruct. We are not all certain that the distortion of mass testing is completely rectifiable; we can only advise that an openness to both vigilance and refinement will be necessary to see this marriage of politics and pedagogy harmoniously realized.

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FIGURE 1

The Alberta Diploma Examinations in English (January 1986)

PART A: WRITTEN RESPONSE (Academic)

1. Personal Response Assignment

In the story "Harrison Bergeron" Vonnegut describes a society in which people have been made equal "every which way." If you lived in such a society, how would you feel and what would you do?

3. Major Assignment

Societies are shaped by such factors as geography, history, economics, politics, the family and religion. Authors of such works as "Looking at Models in the Sears Catalogue" and "Harrison Bergeron" suggest that people are strongly influenced by the prevailing conditions, attitudes and values of the society in which they live, whether they are aware of the influences or not. Compare two selections in which the authors show how people are affected by or respond to the prevailing conditions, attitudes or values of their society.

PART A: WRITTEN RESPONSE (Non-academic)

2. Functional Writing

Plan NOW For Your Future Occupation!

CAREERS DAY

June 21, 1986

Nalwen Composite High School

Don't Miss this Important Event

In the space provided, write a letter inviting your speaker to Nalwen Compcsite High School . . .

3. Response to Visual Information

[The page contains a New Yorker cartoon which has a row of six identical and partially constructed houses on top of which sit carpenters who have all at the same moment hammered their fingers, shades of "little boxes of ticky-tacky"]

Describe how you would feel if you were one of the characters. . .

Table 1

Responses to Survey on the Influence of Diploma Examinations

Abbreviated Questions	(N=45)	A.	B.	C.	D.	E.
1. Follow exam format for essay topics		5%	9	38	36	12
2. Follow exam format for marking essays		6%	10	31	28	24
3. Use of multiple choice	a. Pre-exam	14%	22	48	12	4
	b. Currently	4%	14	36	41	5
4. Stress placed by superiors on results		4%	9	43	30	14

Note. Response Categories: A. Very Seldom; B. Seldom; C. Occasionally; D. Frequently; E. Very Frequently.